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SUBJECT: ITALY: AMBASSADOR'S TOUR D'HORIZON WITH PRODI AND
CENTER-LEFT LEADERS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Spogli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador hosted lunch on September 20 for Center-Left political leaders Romano Prodi, Piero Fassino, Francesco Rutelli, and Massimo D'Alema. The four politicians were mostly in sync, willing to contradict each other politely, and were only moderately deferential to their presumptive leader, Romano Prodi. Should they win next year's general elections, their consensus view on Iraq is that any Italian troop withdrawal would be done in consultation with the U.S. and based on facts on the ground. Less forthcoming than the others, Prodi expressed a need to "respond to the people's request" for early withdrawal. All four support Italian missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan; believe Turkey will not enter the EU in the near future; expressed a need to better integrate Italy's Muslim community; were firm on the need to fight terrorism; and welcomed the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) The Ambassador hosted lunch on September 20 for Center-Left (CL) leaders from the Union Coalition. The four guests were presumptive CL Prime Ministerial candidate Romano Prodi, DS General Secretary Piero Fassino, Former Rome Mayor and 2001 Center-Left candidate Francesco Rutelli (Daisy), and DS President and former Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema. The Ambassador was accompanied by PolOff. The atmosphere was relaxed and the discussion substantive. The four politicians were mostly in sync but willing to contradict each other politely. They were only moderately deferential to their presumptive leader, Romano Prodi.

ITALIAN TROOP DEPLOYMENT IN IRAQ

3. (C) The Ambassador asked the four what the U.S. could expect from them on Iraq if the CL wins next year's general election. Prodi responded that his government would "establish an agenda to withdraw its military from Iraq and engage the country in reconstruction." Fassino qualified this by saying the agenda would not necessarily have dates, and stated that troops would be withdrawn after certain milestones were met. Both Fassino and D'Alema readily agreed with the Ambassador that any decision would need to be made based on "facts on the ground next year." All four politicians expressed concern about how the Iraqi constitutional process would play out. D'Alema pointed out that Iraqi FM Zebari told him in New York last week that the U.S. would need to begin a troop withdrawal--toward more of a deterrence force "based outside the cities that is available when needed." Rutelli preemptively said that Italians had "learned the lessons from Spain" and would not take "any unilateral action" on Iraqi troop deployment. Note: At a speech on September 21, Prodi repeated his comment on Iraqi troop withdrawal and informed the crowd that he had told this to the Ambassador at a lunch the day before. End Note.

4. (C) The Ambassador pressed the four CL politicians to agree that a CL government would make decisions on troop deployment in Iraq based on "facts on the ground and in consultation with the U.S." and reminded them that public speculation on troop withdrawal spurs the insurgency. D'Alema, Fassino and Rutelli agreed though clearly stating that some acceleration of troop withdrawal would be required. Prodi demurred and commented, "we must respond to the people's request."

DEPLOYMENTS IN THE BALKANS, AFGHANISTAN AND THE SUDAN

5. (C) The Ambassador praised the Italian commitments in Afghanistan and the Balkans and asked their view on deployments there. Prodi said he was "pessimistic" on Afghanistan and mentioned the lack of rule of law outside Kabul, Afghanistan's poor resource base for economic development, and the growing strength of local warlords. Without giving Prodi a chance to answer the Ambassador's question, D'Alema said he was also "pessimistic" but that there is a "qualitative difference between troop deployments" in Afghanistan and Iraq and that it is "the right thing" for Italian troops to work with the international community to rebuild Afghanistan even if the prospects for success are slim. Rutelli said Italians are "proud" of their military's

involvement in Afghanistan.

16. (C) On Italian troop deployments to the Balkans, the four

politicians were unified in support of continued involvement.

Fassino, D'Alema and Prodi each pointed out that it was a Center-Left government that initially deployed troops to the Balkans. Rutelli interjected that Italian troops are performing an important mission in the Sudan as well.

TURKEY ENTRANCE INTO THE EU

17. (C) The Ambassador asked their view on Turkish membership in the EU. All agreed that Turkey would not enter the EU in the foreseeable future. Prodi cited public opposition in France, Germany, Austria and increasingly in Italy. D'Alema said French President's Chirac's decision to put all future expansion decisions to public referenda had effectively ended any chance for Turkish EU membership. D'Alema also qualified Prodi's statement by saying that Italy is not a problem and noting Italy's political institutions favor Turkish membership. Fassino stressed the importance of Italian-Turkish commercial relations. However, Fassino also said that Pope Benedict XVI is against Turkey's joining the EU and that this would have a significant impact on parts of the Italian political class. Rutelli noted that the Pope planned to visit Turkey in 18 months.

ITALY'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND TERRORISM

18. (C) All four CL politicians responded that recently enacted anti-terror reforms were neither far-reaching nor particularly innovative (REF A). Prodi, who has publicly declared that the Berlusconi government would need to reform aspects of the law that potentially infringe on personal liberties, only commented that the CL had actively supported the legislation. Prodi continued that US-EU cooperation is essential to fighting international terrorism and underlined the specific importance of greater cooperation against terrorist financing.

19. (C) All four politicians admitted that Italy must do a better job integrating its growing Muslim minority. They said there are different models that have been tried: the French have tried forcing their Muslims to become French, and the British have tried to integrate them into their society. Prodi rejected the French model and stated the Italians must find a way to entice Muslims to participate in Italian society, rejecting the creation of Muslim "social ghettos." He said immigrants must have a clearer path to Italian citizenship and strongly criticized the Bossi/Fini immigration reform (REF A). Referring to recent actions in Milan to close unauthorized Muslim schools (REF B), they all agreed that any Muslim schools must be held to regular Italian education norms and offered Italy's Jewish schools as a model.

110. (C) All four felt the terrorist threat to Italy comes from internationally organized terrorist groups, and felt that integration of Italy's Muslims is one way to combat these terrorist groups' influence in Italy. Prodi said he thought the fact that the London bombers were well integrated into English society was an aberration.

111. (C) D'Alema stated he did not believe that the war in Iraq had "created more terrorists" but said that it has been a clarion call within the Muslim community that we cannot understand. He said the reaction inside the Muslim world has been something like what would happen in Europe if "Muslims took over France." He recounted a story from a recent trip to Libya in which the 18-year-old son of a "very western official" who had lived for several years in London, left one night to fight jihad.

ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM GAZA

112. (C) Prodi cited the Palestinian conflict with Israel as a convenient propaganda tool for terrorist groups and said a solution is necessary to take away that tool. He praised Israeli PM Sharon's courage for withdrawing from Gaza but said the U.S. must stay engaged in order to ensure further progress. Prodi criticized the U.S. for never allowing the EU to serve as a mediator in the conflict, and became animated describing some personal conflicts he had with Sharon. D'Alema said the U.S. should not be blamed for

excluding the EU from the peace process, saying Israel has always opposed EU participation and that the U.S. could not

move against the powerful Israeli lobby. All agreed that economic development is urgent in Gaza.

113. (C) COMMENT: The four Center-Left leaders appeared united in principle on the major issues, but with subtle, yet important differences in approach and style. On Iraq, Fassino, D'Alema and Rutelli were clear--They support a somewhat accelerated Italian troop withdrawal based on facts on the ground but in close consultation with the U.S. Prodi seemed less willing to admit that Italian troops might need to stay in Iraq for an extended period of time. In general, Prodi seemed the most critical of U.S. positions ("slow down on Turkey", "U.S. did not include the EU in the Middle East Peace Process", "pessimistic" on Afghanistan), and more willing to contradict the other three leaders. Fassino was the most eager to show that his views were similar to U.S. positions, and Rutelli seemed the most naturally at ease with his views vis-a-vis the U.S. D'Alema seemed most like a senior statesmen.

114. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Italy's general elections are more than a half year away, and only 8 points separate the Center-Left from the Center-Right in the latest polls. Moreover, should the CL win, we cannot know the dynamics of a future coalition until we see how much influence Fausto Bertinotti and his Refounded Communist (RC) Party will wield. The stronger he is, the more will be the pressure on the other CL parties for an accelerated Italian troop withdrawal. We will continue to work with all four of these leaders, both together and separately, to reinforce how important it is to maintain dialogue with us on Italian troop deployments, and that any redeployment be based on facts on the ground and in consultation with the coalition partners and the Government of Iraq. END COMMENT.

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